
STANDARDIZED EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM
APPROVED COURSE OF INSTRUCTION
FIELD COURSE

UNIFIED COMMAND

MODULE 13
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PARTICIPANT
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This module describes the purposes and advantages of multi-jurisdiction and/or multi-agency Unified Command, and how Unified Command can be applied to incident situations. It describes the Unified Command organization, how Unified Command is established, and the roles of its major elements. The module discusses a number of factors to be considered in implementing Unified Command.

Objectives:

1. Define Unified Command.
2. Define the advantages of Unified Command and the kinds of situations which may call for a Unified Command organization.
3. Identify the primary features of a Unified Command organization.
4. Describe roles and reporting relationships under a Unified Command involving agencies from the same jurisdiction, and under multi-jurisdiction conditions.
5. Describe areas of cost sharing which might apply under a Unified Command structure.
6. Given a simulated situation, describe an appropriate Unified Command organization.

I. Background on Unified Command

Early in the development of ICS, it was recognized that many incidents crossed jurisdictional boundaries or the limits of individual agency functional responsibility.

The standard ICS organizational framework with a single Incident Commander from one jurisdiction or agency did not lend itself to creating an effective organization for multi-jurisdictional incidents, or for incidents involving several agencies from the same political jurisdiction. In fact, the use of a single Incident Commander would, in some cases, not be legally possible or politically advisable.

On the other hand, it was also recognized that every incident must have one person with the responsibility and the authority to direct tactical actions. Lacking a single authority, chaos easily prevails on multi-jurisdictional or multi-agency incidents.

Two solutions were considered:

1. Divide the incident either geographically or functionally so that each jurisdiction or agency could establish its own ICS organization in a well-defined geographical or functional area of responsibility.

This was the simplest political solution, but there were obvious cost and effectiveness reasons why this solution was unacceptable.

2. Create a single ICS incident structure with a built-in process for an effective and responsible multi-jurisdictional or multi-agency approach.

This was the challenge to the early ICS designers, and the solution was an incident management process called Unified Command. Unified Command has been used many times, and has become a major feature of the Incident Command System.

II. Description of Unified Command

Unified Command is a team effort process, allowing all agencies with responsibility for an incident, either geographical or functional, to establish a common set of incident objectives and strategies that all can subscribe to. This is accomplished without losing or abdicating agency authority, responsibility, or accountability. The use of Unified Command in multi-jurisdiction and multi-discipline incidents ensures that effective interagency coordination will take place.

There are essentially four elements to consider in applying Unified Command:

A. Policies, Objectives and Strategies

In ICS, this responsibility belongs to the various jurisdictional and agency administrators, or other governmental authorities who set policy and are accountable to their agencies. This activity is done in advance of tactical operations, and may be coordinated from some other location than where the direct on scene action takes place.

B. Organization

In ICS, the organization consists of the various jurisdictional or agency on-scene senior representatives, (agency incident commanders) operating within a Unified Command structure.

C. Resources

In ICS Unified Command, resources are the personnel and equipment supplied by the jurisdictions and agencies that have functional or jurisdictional responsibility.

D. Operations

In ICS Unified Command, resources stay under the administrative and policy control of their agencies. However, tactical deployment of resources will be done by a single Operations Section Chief based on the requirements of the incident action plan.

Unified Command represents an important element in increasing the effectiveness of multi-jurisdictional or multi-agency incidents. As incidents become more complex and involve more agencies, the need for Unified Command is increased.

III. Using Unified Command

The decision to use Unified Command should be based on the tactical response objectives for the Operational Period being planned.

For example, if there is a structure fire that also involves a possible crime scene, a Unified Command between fire and police - even though they are from the same jurisdiction - would be called for to ensure that each agency's tactical response objectives are being coordinated at the Command level.

If the same scene were only a structure fire but required law enforcement presence only for traffic control, and the utility department for shutdown, then Unified Command would not be required, as police and utility objectives are working in support of the primary fire objective.

- Unified Command should be considered when different agencies from other jurisdictions are involved.

For example, a HAZMAT incident affecting city and county property and a state highway. Each of the agencies with legal responsibility and jurisdiction have specific objectives to be achieved. The use of Unified Command will facilitate the Operational Period planning.

- Unified Command may not be necessary for the entire incident.

In the first Operational Periods there may be a greater requirement for the use of Unified Command. As the incident progresses into recovery phases, it may be desirable to revert to a single Incident Command.

- The application of Unified Command should be applied as the Operational Period tactical objectives require. There is no requirement to maintain Unified Command when it is no longer required.

IV. Advantages of Using Unified Command

Below are the principal advantages of using Unified Command.

- One set of objectives is developed for the entire incident.
- A collective approach is made to developing strategies to achieve incident goals.
- Information flow and coordination is improved between all jurisdictions and agencies involved in the incident.
- All agencies with responsibility for the incident have an understanding of one another's priorities and restrictions.
- No agency's authority or legal requirements will be compromised or neglected.
- Each agency is fully aware of the plans, actions and constraints of all others.
- The combined efforts of all agencies are optimized as they perform their respective assignments under a single Incident Action Plan.
- Duplicative efforts are reduced or eliminated, thus reducing cost and chances for frustration and conflict.

V. Applications

Several examples show the use of an ICS Unified Command application.

1. Incidents that impact more than one political jurisdiction:

The classic example is a wildland fire starting in one jurisdiction and burning into other jurisdictions. Responding agencies from each jurisdiction all have the same basic mission (fire control), and it is the political and/or geographical boundaries that mandate multi-agency cooperation and involvement.

2. Incidents involving multiple agencies (or departments) within the same political jurisdiction:

Hazardous materials incidents provide an example for this kind of a situation. The fire department has responsibility for fire control and rescue, the police department has responsibility for evacuation and area security, and public health agencies and others have responsibility for site clean-up.

Major commercial airplane crashes are another example. Here, the management challenge increases.

In one geographical location, fire, law enforcement, health services, the FAA, and others all have legal responsibilities to perform their different missions at the site of the same incident.

All may be active at the same time and in the same place. It is the functional role and the legal obligation - not the geography - that brings about the multiple involvement.

3. Incidents that impact on (or involve) several political and functional agencies:

These kind of incidents occur with storms, earthquakes, and other major natural disasters, and they present the greatest incident management challenges.

In these incidents, large numbers of local, state, and federal agencies become immediately involved. These emergencies cross political boundaries and involve multiple functional authorities. Roles, missions, and responsibilities are all intermixed.

ICS' Unified Command approach to incidents like those just mentioned is a practical and cost-effective solution. By using Unified Command, participating agencies can improve overall incident management and achieve goals in a timely and cost-effective manner.

VI. Primary Features of a Unified Command Organization

- A single integrated incident organization.
- Collocated (shared) facilities.
- A single planning process and Incident Action Plan.
- Shared planning/intelligence, logistical, and finance/administration operations.
- A coordinated process for resource ordering.

A. A Single Integrated Incident Organization

Under Unified Command, the various jurisdictions and/or agencies are blended together into an integrated unified team. The resulting organization may be a mix of personnel from several jurisdictions or agencies, each performing functions as appropriate, and working toward a common set of objectives.

The proper mix of participants in a Unified Command organization will depend on:

- The location of the incident, which often determines the jurisdictions that must be involved.
- The kind of incident, which dictates the functional agencies of the involved jurisdiction(s), as well as other agencies that may be involved.

In a multi-jurisdictional situation, a Unified Command structure could consist of one responsible official from each jurisdiction. In other cases, Unified Command may consist of several functional department managers or assigned representatives from within a single political jurisdiction.

Because of common ICS organization and terminology, personnel from other jurisdictions or agencies can be easily integrated into a single organization.

B. Collocated (shared) Facilities

By bringing the responsible officials, Command Staffs and planning elements together in a single Incident Command Post a coordinated effort can be maintained for as long as the Unified Command structure is required.

One base can serve the needs of multiple agencies. Similarly, resources from several agencies can be brought together in one or more Staging Areas.

C. A Single Planning Process and Incident Action Plan

The planning process for Unified Command is similar to that used on a single jurisdiction or agency incident.

One important distinction is the need for every jurisdictional or functional agency's Incident Commander to attend a Command Meeting. Command Meetings occur at the beginning of the incident and prior to all planning meetings, for the purpose of establishing over arching objectives and initiating the Unified Command. Additional Command Meetings may occur if the situation changes or a substantial change in personnel occurs.

This meeting provides the opportunity to discuss and concur on important issues prior to joint incident action planning. The agenda for the Command Meeting should include the following:

- State jurisdictional/agency priorities and objectives.
- Present jurisdictional limitations, concerns, restrictions.
- Develop a single set of overall incident objectives.
- Establish and agree on acceptable priorities.
- Adopt an overall strategy(ies) to accomplish objectives.
- Agree on the basic organization structure.
- Designate the best qualified and acceptable Operations Section Chief.
- Agree on General Staff personnel designations and planning, logistical, and finance agreements and procedures.

- Agree on the resource ordering process to be followed.
- Agree on cost-sharing procedures.
- Agree on informational matters.
- Designate one agency official to act as the Unified Command spokesperson.

Command Meeting Requirements

- The Command Meeting should include only agency Incident Commanders.
- The meeting should be brief, and important points should be documented.
- Prior to the meeting, the respective responsible officials should have reviewed the purposes and agenda items described above, and be prepared to discuss them.

Incident Action Planning meetings will use the results of the Command Meeting to decide on:

- Tactical operations for the next operational period, (Operational period objectives).
- Establishing resource requirements and determining resource availability and sources.
- Making resource assignments.
- Establishing the unified Operations Section organization.
- Establishing combined planning/intelligence, logistics, and finance/administration operations as needed.

The end result of the planning process will be an Incident Action Plan which addresses multi-jurisdiction or multi-agency priorities, and provides tactical operations and resource assignments for the unified effort.

D. Shared Planning/Intelligence, Logistical, and Finance/Administration Sections

The Unified Command incident organization can also benefit by integrating multi-jurisdictional and/or multi-agency personnel into various other functional areas.

For example, in Operations and Planning/Intelligence, Deputy Section Chiefs can be designated from an adjacent jurisdiction which may in future operational periods have the primary responsibility for these functions.

By placing other agency's personnel in the Planning/Intelligence Section's Situation, Resources, and Demobilization Units, there can be significant savings in personnel, and increased communication and information sharing.

In Logistics, a Deputy Logistics Section Chief from another agency or jurisdiction can help to coordinate incident support as well as facilitate resource ordering activities. Placing other agencies personnel into the Communications Unit helps in developing a single incident-wide Communications Plan.

Although the Finance/Administration Section often has detailed agency specific procedures to follow, cost savings may be realized through agreements on cost sharing for essential services. For example, one agency might provide food services, another fuel, another security, etc.

E. Unified Command Resource Ordering

An important advantage of Unified Command is advance establishment of resource ordering procedures. These decisions are made during the Command Meeting.

The Planning Meeting will determine resource requirements for all levels of the organization. However, the nature and location of the incident will, to some extent, dictate the most effective off-incident resource ordering process.

The resource requirements established at the planning meeting are given to the Logistics Section, which then creates a resource order which is transmitted to the designated ordering point for processing.

Some situations may require resource orders to be made to different agencies from the incident. Multiple resource orders are generally less desirable than the use of a single resource order, and should be avoided when possible.

If the incident is operating under Unified Command, specific kinds and types of resources to be supplied by certain jurisdictions or agencies may be pre-designated as a part of the resource order. This will depend upon the prior commitments of the responsible agency officials in the Unified Command Meeting.

If this information is not known in advance, then it will be up to the individual agency receiving the resource order to fill the order based on closest available resources.

VII. Guidelines for the Use of Unified Command

1. Understand ICS Unified Command

It is essential to understand how ICS Unified Command functions. Knowledge of ICS principles and structure will enable managers to accept and easily adapt to a Unified Command mode of operation when it is required. Lack of knowledge about ICS can limit the willingness of some jurisdictions or agencies to participate in a Unified Command incident organization. **It is impossible to implement Unified Command unless agencies have agreed to participate in the process.**

2. Collocate Essential Functions

Establish a single Incident Command Post and, as needed, other facilities where all agencies can operate together. Avoid the confusion created by separate command, planning, and logistical set-ups.

3. Implement Unified Command at an Early Stage of a Multi-jurisdictional or Multi-agency Incident

It is essential to begin joint planning as early as possible. Initiate Unified Command as soon as two or more agencies having jurisdictional or functional responsibilities come together on an incident. It is especially important on those incidents where there may be conflicting priorities based on agency responsibilities.

4. Concur on an Operations Section Chief and Other General Staff Members

The Operations Section Chief will normally be from the jurisdiction or agency which has the greatest involvement in the incident, although that is not essential.

The Operations Section Chief should be the most qualified and experienced person available. The selection of the Operations Section Chief must be agreed upon by the Unified Command, as the Operations Section Chief will have full authority to implement the operations portion of the Incident Action Plan. It is also necessary to agree on other General Staff personnel who will be implementing their portions of the Incident Action Plan.

5. If Necessary, Designate One of the Incident Commanders to be a Spokesperson

The Incident Commanders may see the need to identify one of them to act as spokesperson for the Unified Command.

This can provide a designated channel of communications from General and Command Staff members into the Unified Command. That person does not make Unified Command decisions, but does provide a point of contact as necessary for the General and Command Staffs.

6. Train Often as a Team

Finally, it is important to conduct training exercises in using Unified Command with adjacent jurisdictions and functional agencies whenever possible.

VIII. Functioning in Unified Command

Individually and collectively, the designated agency Incident Commander's functioning in a Unified Command have the following responsibilities at an incident:

1. They must be clear on their jurisdictional or agency limitations. Any legal, political, jurisdictional, or safety restrictions must be identified and made known to all.
2. They must be authorized to perform certain activities and actions on behalf of the jurisdiction or agency they represent. These actions could include:

- Ordering of additional resources in support of the Incident Action Plan.
 - The possible loaning or sharing of resources to other jurisdictions.
 - Agreeing to financial cost-sharing arrangements with participating agencies.
3. The Unified Command has the responsibility to manage the incident to the best of its abilities. This includes:
- Working closely with the other Incident Commander's in the Unified Command.
 - Providing sufficient qualified staff and resources.
 - Anticipating and resolving problems.
 - Delegating authority as needed.
 - Inspecting and evaluating performance.
 - Communicating with their own agency on priorities, plans, problems, and progress.
 - Coordinate with their jurisdictions through a DOC or EOC when activated.
4. The members of the Unified Command must function together as a team. They must ensure that effective coordination takes place. In many ways, this is the most important function they perform in Unified Command.

There are two distinct levels of coordination:

- Coordination with other members of the Unified Command team. It is essential that all participants be kept mutually informed, involved, and consulted.
- Coordination with higher authorities, agency administrators, etc. It is important to keep their respective authorities well informed and confident that the incident is being competently managed.